coffin nails as collateral

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by BenevolentErrancy

Summary

Walking made the world shift and sway and fall away. Even thinking was hard these days, any effort to keep his thoughts in order thwarted by the smallest of movements, or by the brush of an unwelcome hand through his hair. There was truly nothing Xie Lian could do but endure, but he had spent centuries perfecting that skill. Eventually things gave. They rotted or crumbled or grew bored, and he would still be there.

When the mortal that held his hair with a dirty fist decided he would rather gamble him away than keep him, Xie Lian could only hope that this was what would happen.

Notes

so I've had Wen Ning's nails on the brain lately (hurr hurr) and decided to do horrible things with that thought

- Translation into Русский available: Гробовой гвоздь как залог by ChaoticSpace

"So? What do you think it is?"

Xie Lian kept his head down, and kept still. It was easier that way. There was little he could do to change his circumstances at the moment, and any abrupt movements made him nauseous and off-balanced. If his words would not be heeded, as he knew they wouldn't be, then it was simply easier to let the mortals speak above his head while he tried to get his clumsy thoughts in order.

"It's not a ghost, that's a near certainty," said the cultivator.

A name had been given at some point, but Xie Lian was not in a state to keep track of such things. It was enough that he remembered that this new person was a wandering cultivator at all, though Xie Lian could have figured that out from his boots alone. His boots were a good quality and supple, made for quick, sure movements as would be required from martial arts, but they were also dusty and clearly worn from time spent on the road. The voices overhead were difficult to track without getting a headache — they pushed and pulled against Xie Lian like battering waves — so he kept himself grounded by simply watching the cultivator's boots step back and forth across his field of vision.

"But it won't die, what else could it be?"

Even as muddled as Xie Lian was these days, he didn't need to see that speaker to know that voice. It grated against his mind like sand — like nails. The only voice he had heard in… well, he wasn't sure. Time was too fluid like this, it ran and blurred like cheap ink if he looked at it too long. But it had been the only voice in his world for some while. It was the voice that held him, contained him, and controlled him. It was the voice that had finally decided to commission a cultivator, to figure out the exact nature of the creature it was harbouring beneath its roof.

"Please, not a ghost," Xie Lian murmured, doing his best to string words and tones together in a way that made sense. They felt fat and heavy and stupid in his mouth, but he'd had a while to think them through. This cultivator may be his only chance for a while to get away, if he could just realise that Xie Lian wasn't a ghost and shouldn't be subjected to such treatment.

(Well, Xie Lian not being a ghost and whether or not he deserved such treatment were not mutually exclusive. But after eight hundred years of bad luck you learnt to keep some optimism or you drowned. Not many people in the past had objected to his treatment, but it could happen. His bamboo hat attested to that.)

"Don't speak!" snarled the voice, and a boot — not the cultivator's boot, but the heavy boot of a labourer — suddenly cut across his vision and caught him in the side, below the ribs.

Xie Lian sprawled across the ground, landing heavily on his shoulder. These were such inconsequential bits of pain that they hardly registered except without his arms to catch himself, his head hit the ground and the thing inside *jostled* .

Everything whited out briefly. Language disappeared. Sight, sound, thought, it all disappeared and the only thing that remained was rising bile that burned his throat and directionless panic as he waited for it all to settle. Each time he found himself wondering if this would be the time it wouldn't. If this would be the time that descended him into an inescapable fog of nausea and pain.

Eventually it did pass, though he still trembled from the all-consuming agony of it. It took a while for the world to make sense of itself again. It was like the rest of existence was simply made of a flock of little birds, staying together but only loosely. Whenever Xie Lian was jostled like that, it was like the birds had taken flight: the world didn't vanish but it became scattered, out of order, out of sense, and Xie Lian could do nothing but wait for those disparate little birds to flutter back to their proper spots and form a picture that had meaning once more.

The first thing he was properly aware of, besides the pain, was the feeling of coarse wood under his cheek. That was welcome, it was still and stable and made him feel less like being sick. The next was Ruoye. Ruoye didn't move much these days, because there wasn't much it could do that wouldn't cause Xie Lian discomfort, but he did miss it when it was too still. Despite being knotted tightly around Xie Lian's wrists, it moved now, thrashing and tugging in response to its his pain. He felt sorry for it; he knew it wanted nothing more than to fly free and attack the people doing this to them, but all it could do was pull itself into more desperate knots.

Once Xie Lian thought he had some control over his body again, he fought with his spasming hand muscles until he could curl his fingers enough to stroke and soothe Ruoye.

It was only some time afterwards that the rest of the world came back properly. The man that had caught him and the cultivator were still speaking above his head, in a way that felt almost dream-like.

"And you say it really can't die?"

"Nothing kills it," his man confirmed and if the world were less dream-like Xie Lian would have shuddered. Because the man had certainly experimented with that once he had found out. It was all a little hard to keep straight, a bit hard to remember, but that was probably for the best. He preferred not to remember most of it.

Their first encounter had been one of complete chance. The fractured portions that Xie Lian could remember went like this: It had been an unfortunate confrontation, a labourer trudging home with his cart of supplies after not finding the work he had wanted. Defeated and angry, he had been looking for a fight, and had found what he had perceived as an easy target in Xie Lian. It should have been a trivial enough thing to resolve — Xie Lian was much stronger and faster than any mortal even with his spiritual energy sealed — but his bad luck had ensured that wasn't how it happened.

While he had been trying to talk the man down and step carefully away, his foot had caught on a root and he had fallen, impaling himself entirely on one of the wooden posts that had lined one side of the mountainous path. If he had been luckier, he would have missed the fence entirely and fallen straight off the side of the ledge. He would have broken across the

rocks below, but it would have a very temporary pain compared to what was to come. Instead, Xie Lian had hung there, post through his belly, and he hadn't known whether to laugh or cry at the horrified look on the man's face. It was, he supposed, one way to end the confrontation. The man would surely run and he would be left to gather his wits and pull himself off the post once he came too again.

Except that wasn't what had happened. The man had panicked, thinking he could be blamed for the death if someone else came along the path and spotted a corpse hanging there. He had taken planks and a hammer from his pull-cart and laid them out to fasten a hasty coffin, probably planning to drop him into a shallow grave and pray that was enough to appease his spirit. Only that was when Xie Lian's body had come back to awareness and jerked, heaving itself off the post, gasping and pulsing blood.

The man had panicked. The hammer had come down.

And that was when things had really begun to break apart.

His body had slumped. Had woken. Had writhed. Had slumped. Had woken, clawed at the wrongness, threw up, slumped. And then woken again. What happened between all that was beyond him. He put things together in bits and pieces. Ruoye had been knotted around his wrists at some point, between his brief flirtations with awareness. A coffin nail had been driven through the back of his skull, possibly in an attempt to kill him properly. His body now tried to heal around it. He was at least capable of movement, thought, speech again, which he hadn't been for a while.

On the other hand, being capable of those things while in the hands of this man was not a boon.

The man, once he had gotten over his horror, had found an unexpected windfall on his lap. For a while he had been more than happy to have a weak, compliant body to pull around, to kick around, to—

Xie Lian breathed out and let those memories blur like steam from a kettle. Sometimes he could almost be grateful for the nail.

"I can show you, if you don't believe me," the man was saying to the cultivator.

Xie Lian couldn't see him from where he lay on the floor, but could imagine him lifting a knife, a hammer, a pair of shears— "Please," he said, because he couldn't quite find the words for *don't* .

"No need," said the cultivator, though it didn't really sound like he was responding to Xie Lian. It could be that Xie Lian hadn't actually formed words at all, just meaningless noise. It didn't matter in the end, for all the difference it made.

The boots in front of his eyes stopped their pacing and suddenly the cultivator was leaning down and hands were cupping Xie Lian's face. They weren't cruel hands, but they were firm, and suddenly he was forced to clamber back to his knees. The change in orientation was so sudden that his legs nearly gave out and he almost slumped bodily against the cultivator. He

did manage to keep his balance though, and stared up at the cultivator's face as his head was directed upwards.

The cultivator twisted his head back and forth, peering at him, looking for something that Xie Lian couldn't identify. Xie Lian finally closed his eyes to try to press back the stabbing headache. He felt fingers brush his cheek, run through his hair, along his eyelashes. It was equal parts invasive and addictive, as the only gentle touch Xie Lian had felt in a long while.

"It has no ghost qi," the cultivator said as he let go of Xie Lian's face and Xie Lian suddenly had to ensure he could balance on his own. "And its body is too well-crafted to be a ghost's in any case. Each strand of hair is perfect, and the face isn't rotting in any notable way. Just underfed, if anything."

"So if it's not a ghost, does that mean it's safe?" asked the man.

That really was the only reason the cultivator was here at all. At first the man had been all too happy to make use of Xie Lian, in the limited capacities he could be used like this, but over time he had grown more and more fearful of what sort of creature he might have invited into his home (*into his bed.*) When he had heard of a wandering cultivator passing through town, he had been eager to get a second opinion.

"I didn't say that," said the cultivator. "I don't know what it is and that makes it more dangerous, if anything. *This* thing here possesses a lot of resentful energy."

Ruoye was tweaked, and that made the silk band snap and twist like an angry dog on a leash.

"When the boy first rose from the dead, that thing nearly killed me," the man agreed quickly. "It appeared out of nowhere, tried to strangle me! If it hadn't been as disoriented as its master, I'd be the dead one! As it was, I was lucky to grab it and subdue it; managed to trap the two together, fairly clever if you ask me." His smug laughter was an oily curl against Xie Lian's throbbing brain.

The cultivator just hummed thoughtfully. "If I were to guess, I think you have it backwards. The band seems much more powerful and aware than the body. I suspect that it's the true demon, and that the body it controls is merely a puppet. You said you fought with it on the road outside of town? Then I wouldn't be surprised if it uses the human body to lure travellers to it and then strikes. And see how lethargic the body is, now that it's contained?" The cultivator's boot nudged Xie Lian's chin in demonstration. "The silk demon is probably only feeding the body a limited amount of energy, now that it's trapped."

"So as long as I keep the silk demon trapped, the boy is safe to keep using?"

Xie Lian shivered. He didn't think about it though, he refused, letting his brain lose those thoughts like dropped coins.

"No. There is no such thing as 'safe' when it comes to demons. What will you do if it unravels itself? Or decides to discard its human shell entirely in order to escape? This sort of resentful creature could have only been made in extreme and tragic circumstances and you shouldn't doubt its power. It would be capable of destroying you, if not your family — or

even the village! I don't know enough of it to truly know its capabilities. You'd be better off getting rid of it rather than playing with fire."

A kindle of hope sparked in Xie Lian's chest. He mentally encouraged Ruoye to be as vicious looking as it could manage, never mind how it affected his wrists. Everything healed with time.

"I can't just let it go!" said the man, sharp edge to his voice. "It would just turn around and hunt me down immediately!"

"I could exorcise it for you. It's not a ghost so it won't have ashes to find — I could destroy it permanently."

That wouldn't necessarily be pleasant, whatever sort of death the cultivator thought as sufficient for eliminating a demon, but Xie Lian would be willing to endure it. A singular death would be better than the man, than these four walls, than hands touching, than—

"Seems like such a waste," grumbled the man. "It nearly killed me, catching this thing! And it wasn't easy to deal with at first, you know. Had to train it, basically, like breaking in a donkey. Stupid fucking thing. And now I'm just supposed to throw all that time and effort away?"

Humans were remarkable; even when threatened with demonic retribution they still had their own concerns.

"Then why not sell it? There's no guarantee it wouldn't eventually come for you, but if you passed it on to someone else then you might at least redirect its resentment." This person's cultivation method clearly didn't call for many scruples.

"Who would buy this? If I go parading it around I'll end up getting arrested! Or be the one hunted down and exorcised."

"Depends on where you take it," said the cultivator shrewdly. "Have you ever heard of Ghost City?"

"What? No."

"It's the territory of the Ghost King, Hua Cheng."

This name must ring a bell, because a shudder passed over the man. It wasn't a name Xie Lian knew — or, at least one he didn't think he knew — but he didn't make much effort to keep up with the heavenly or ghostly realms. He had enough problems in the mortal realm.

The cultivator continued his explanation. "He has a Gambling Den that's said to take all sorts of wagers. You can request your wildest dreams there, if you have enough to offer as collateral, and even more if Hua Cheng himself is in residence and taking bets. If you take your demon there, that must be worth something. Then you can bet on a desire, like your business thriving or finding the love of your life, and if you win you walk away richer and if

you lose all you've done is gotten rid of a problem. If anyone can deal with a strange silk demon, it'd surely be a Calamity like Hua Cheng."

The man was nodding, eyes wide surely with vision of his wildest dreams being granted in a ghostly gambling den. And all for the low, low price of Xie Lian's person.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

So he did neither and shut his eyes and stopped paying attention for a bit so that the throbbing in his head could ease.

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The throbbing in his head never did ease, really, but it came and went like some burrowing animal, exploring the hollowed out tunnel that must surely exist in Xie Lian's brain.

Sometimes, the throbbing migrated, splitting and spreading from his head to take up residence in other parts of his body. Hits and punches did little to an ex-martial god, but even to him, in this state, a broken limb could hurt. The fever-hot throb-throb-throb of too slow healing, and too mortal feeling.

Sometimes he noticed his stomach. At some point the man had realised that Xie Lian took little feeding. Water or food was sometimes tossed to him, because he went too boneless and vague without anything, but it was sparse even by the standards of a scrap collector. The throbbing of an empty stomach was acidic and sour but would eventually quiet again.

Sometimes, it was lower parts of his body, parts he had never thought much about, prior. It had been against his cultivation path, and had been something he had contently had little to do with. It was harder to ignore these days, when the throb-throb-throb migrated downwards to become a harmony to the thrusting that made up a torn and bloody violation. A humiliation, probably, somewhere, but the nail made emotions as hard to hold as memories. Or maybe several centuries of degradation that did that. What was humiliation to the likes of him, it wasn't like he had dignity to lose.

The first time it had been done to him, it had been with a ragged sandal shoved into his mouth to keep him silent, when the man had still feared others noticing. It had been furtive, in the dark. It had hurt. It had hurt and hurt and hurt, and gotten deeper and deeper and deeper, piercing an untouchable place, and that was all Xie Lian knew of it. It had been early, before his brain had tried to heal around the damage done to it and everything had been shadow and shape and confusion. A violation of abstraction. A mercy, perhaps, or a canvas for more horrid imaginings.

Slowly, Xie Lian had healed, in some broken way. Brain pierced by iron, body pierced by flesh, something torn and slicked with blood and possibly unable to ever be returned to its original state. He had become more aware. The man had become more bold.

Xie Lian remembered the other times, when he let the crumbling parts of his brain linger on them. The blunt press of entry, the burning stab of penetration, the way it deepened and deepened in jerks and thrusts. The way the man's hips, the coarse hair of his groin, had

slapped and scraped against him. The hot trail of blood, and then the hot flood of finish that burnt him inside out like magma. Then cold, as the sweat and spend was allowed to chill in the air as the man went to clean himself.

Sometimes the man didn't press himself in. Sometimes he rubbed. It was hot, too-hard, too-soft (the softness of it was somehow more offensive, like the parody of kindness) and it was rutted against his skin, trying to claim any clean part of him. Against the dip of his ass, the curve of his spine, in a fistful of long, tangled hair. Sometimes below the curve of his jaw bone, like a knife against his throat. He hated that. The way the man's wiry hair would rub against his face, the way it made the nail in his skull jump and shudder, the way his nose was pressed against skin and the smell was like a physical thing that his mind couldn't hold in its entirety. It took that smell and broke it into colours and shapes because a single sensory organ could not contain it all, not with his head like this. Now, when Xie Lian closed his eyes, he could sometimes taste that smell on the back of his tongue.

He had forced it into Xie Lian's mouth once. Had pressed his thumbs in first, had pried his teeth open and lips back like a snarling dog, had coaxed and threatened and then pressed it in. Xie Lian had bitten immediately, without even a thought. He had been beaten afterwards, head left so bloody that he couldn't tell where it was coming from — the hole in his scalp, or his mouth, or his eyes, or if he had just stopped being human and had become a pile of split skin and bones. Eventually though he had healed and the man never tried that again. Xie Lian did not regret it. It was a taste he still dreamt of, and it had lasted only seconds. He let the taste of copper cover it as much as he could.

Most of these encounters bled into one another, like spend dripping between one strand of hair to the next, sticking them all together, making an indecipherable knot. Where one memory ended and the next began wasn't always clear, it was simply a sickening mess of feeling and smelling and hurting and tasting. Only one moment stood out with distinction. The fourth time since Xie Lian's head had healed enough to track time again. Even that time had been mostly unremarkable in its mundane vulgarity. Xie Lian's nose had broken when he had been tipped onto his front, no arms to catch himself as the man groped for his ass, but even that wasn't so special as to stand out. What did stand out had not the way his nose had broken, but the way his cultivation had.

If asked, Xie Lian might have expected it to be ruined from the beginning, but his cultivation path had never been about sex. Rather it was about abstaining from worldly pleasures. What was pleasurable in the destruction of his body? Were the things he experienced now so unlike the various torments Xie Lian had experienced over the years?

The fourth time though, the man had been nestled deep inside him, twitching and repulsive, when he had stopped moving and sat back. Had dragged Xie Lian back, so he could do nothing but collapse against his chest, fingers spasming beneath Ruoye's piteous, sympathetic squeezing. And then the man had reached between Xie Lian's legs and felt. It was small and soft, like a scared animal, a pathetic thing, but the man had whispered wetly in his ear, words that Xie Lian may or may not have understood at the time but which he had not remembered since. But he remembered the feeling of fingers rubbing, coaxing, clawing. How he had at first watching dispassionately, not sure what disgusted him more, the tentacle-like

fondling at his groin or the occasional throb buried deep inside him, but then his body had begun to respond.

It had amused the man for an evening. The things he had told Xie Lian, the things he had called him, made that clear. This new degradation was an exciting game; the renewed frenzy it sparked in Xie Lian was a challenge he had been missing.

Xie Lian had reached crisis, making a mess of the man's fingers and the floor beneath him. The man's sticky fingers had forced themselves into his mouth, but this had all been trivial compared to the quiet little break that Xie Lian had felt deep in his core.

Had this been pleasure? Xie Lian couldn't say. Maybe the nail in his head really had stirred his mind up beyond salvation because he hadn't thought it was but it had been enough for his cultivation. It must have been pleasure. He had sobbed hard and deep after that, for the first time in years, in decades, possibly the first time in that century. He wasn't even entirely sure if he had been sad. Mostly it had felt… empty. It wasn't like he could use his cultivation. But it was gone. One of the few things he held — besides a strip of silk and a bamboo hat — from his time before.

It was gone now. Xie Lian usually didn't grow upset over the loss of some trinket, but he couldn't stop crying, and he couldn't stop the way grey clouds blotted his vision, or the way his trembling body had brought the man to his own climax.

It wouldn't be the last time that Xie Lian was drawn to crisis for the man's amusement, but the other times simply mixed with the rest. Quickly, it became as unremarkable as pain. But that first ordeal, the last breaking point for his pathetically held cultivation, Xie Lian did remember.

He might also remember the one that came about after the departure of the cultivator, purely because it had the chance of being the last with the man. He couldn't remember the beginning of it all, it only seemed right to remember the end. Despite this significance though, the acts themselves were as plain and dull as ever. Xie Lian already had a splitting headache from trying to track a conversation, so everything had been over-saturated and too sensitive. The man had tried tugging him to life that night, but it had been too much. It had felt like fireworks were under his skin, so the man had contended himself with biting his shoulder bloody and seeing how it made Xie Lian's body twitch like a dying fish.

When he'd finished in Xie Lian, he had stayed pressed inside. Hot and moist and vile. He had held Xie Lian to his chest, like a treasured pet, and stroked his filthy hair, and fallen asleep with grand plans of his gambling debut. Xie Lian most likely slept as well — the fractured glass of his mind did not always make waking and dreaming easily distinguishable, but he knew he must have because he woke up to the feeling of being rutted once more, one last time.

That night, if all went successfully, he would no longer be this man's. Xie Lian couldn't say whether there was joy or despair to accompany that thought. Perhaps it didn't matter. Until his hands were unbound or the nail was drawn from his head, very little mattered. But all things could be endured and all things ended, and perhaps soon this would too. If nothing else, it could not outlast the hundred years spent in a coffin.

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If Xie Lian should ever want to find Ghost City again, he certainly wouldn't be able to (although if the cultivator's plan was in earnest it sounded like Xie Lian's much larger concern would be leaving it).

He couldn't say if he had understood the directions discussed above his head at the time, because what had happened after the cultivator had left was the sort of thing that Xie Lian tried to let drip from his mind. When he did that, when he leaned into the spike of agony in his head, let it thicken and overwhelm and blot out the world, he had no real say in what stayed and what left. Thoughts bled away constantly, but if he really let his mind break away from itself sometimes he could sluice more away. He'd had a lot to let sluice away that night. So whatever had been said before that was well and truly gone. (Not everything from the rest of the night was gone, and the pain between his legs wasn't, but enough that he could be grateful.)

The whole process of getting to Ghost City seemed like an ordeal. Since it existed in the ghost realm it didn't have a singular location in the mortal realm and entering it seemed esoteric to the extreme — or based entirely on fortune, for all Xie Lian understood it. What it did seem to involve was Xie Lian being dragged around in the night air for much too long by an increasingly irate mortal.

Although the man had made a perfunctory effort to clean Xie Lian up, to make him look more valuable than he was, Xie Lian really wasn't dressed for this. He wore a robe that all but hung off him and left too much skin exposed to the evening chill. There was still a stickiness to him that didn't help matters, dried sweat and other fluids that racked shivers through him.

If Xie Lian had thought it would have helped at all, he would have happily fallen his knees and simply cried for mercy, to be allowed to lie in the soothing mud — either to be fetched later once the man had found his entry point, or to be left to be consumed by mud entirely. If he wanted to be rid of Xie Lian, there was nothing that Xie Lian was happier to facilitate. Stumbling around with brain-addled legs and an unmentionable pain that throbbed obscenely through his lower back made him happy to promise to never seek out the man again, and to just be allowed to lie on the ground until the roots themselves grew around him. Maybe, with them holding him in place, he would finally feel still and settled and less nauseous all the time.

The peace of cold mud and dark roots never came to him. Instead he got Ghost City.

This was almost certainly hell.

The first thing he did was collapse and throw up. There had been no other option. The colours, the sounds, the noise, they drove into Xie Lian's brain, each a new, horrible nail to nestle next to the first. The pain was overwhelming, even for a creature as ancient and worn as Xie Lian — there was nothing physical about it, nothing Xie Lian could fight or resist. It was the smell of frying meat, the sound of sellers hawking their wares, the blazing light from paper lanterns. All perfectly mundane and so overwhelming that Xie Lian had no choice but

to sob on the ground. He couldn't even be ashamed, he had left shame behind so long ago; he only wanted it to end.

He would do anything to lie down in the mud in that dark, quiet, soothing forest. He didn't care how cold it had been, he would welcome the cold, let the chill freeze his nerves and heart and lungs until he finally felt at peace. Here, the busy street was warm and sticky from too many bodies.

Things moved around him. He couldn't make them out. It was all blocks of colours and noise, even with his eyelids pressed shut. If his hands were free, he would have them pressed against his eyes, ears, mouth, anything to make it stop.

The mortal was almost certainly yelling at him to get up, though his words were no more distinguishable from the others, all of it a soup in some foul stew pot; he knew only because something was kicking him and that was generally accompanied by yelling. What did a kick matter to Xie Lian though, when he was already in the deepest of agonies? A kick was nothing on a good day, and may as well be a gnat buzzing at his ear now.

He was moved, somehow. Dragged, presumably. He couldn't say anything more than that, he barely had a sense of what was up and down. If he had been allowed to lie facedown in the ghost-filled street it probably would have felt like the road was writhing beneath him like a giant snake, each cobble a horrible scale grating against his skin, so any extra movement was just more incoherency added to the mess.

Eventually they entered a building, and things stilled, somewhat. It took time. His head felt raw and too empty and too full and vaguely white in a way that told him the nail had been dislodged and there was new damage that his body hadn't healed yet. He was struggling to see anything from one eye, which wasn't helping things feel settled. But the noise and light and smells of the street were gone. Wherever they were now, it was pressed into some alcove of a larger building. Xie Lian could vaguely make out towering red columns near him. The light was dimmer, and though there was still a raucous noise it was slightly removed from where he was now.

The mortal was in the process of cussing him out in a low voice, accusing him of trying to make him look bad, trying to make him lose face before he had even gotten to a gambling table.

"If they decide you aren't worth anything, you'll regret it," he swore, fingers fisted in his hair, pulling Xie Lian's face so they were inches apart. Xie Lian kept his eyes shut because trying to concentrate on that on top of the smell of rancid teeth would surely tip him back over the precarious edge he was on. "I'll take you outside and give you to whatever hungry ghost wants you? Understand?"

He gave Xie Lian a shake, like a misbehaving dog. Xie Lian nodded weakly. A part of him wanted to ask how that was any better or worse than the situation he was in now, but at the very least he wasn't out on that street. He would do a lot to avoid that for even a little bit longer.

"You're going to show what a good, tame pet you are. Which means I'll not be dragging you. Walk. Crawl if you have to. Or I'll stuff you into one of those grills and we'll see how many times you can revive while you roast."

Xie Lian groaned, which he hoped was interpreted as agreement.

Clearly the building they were in was the Gambler's Den of which the cultivator had spoken. At the moment they must be in some antechamber before the main gambling hall. On shaky legs, Xie Lian gripped the column next to him and heaved himself upwards. The man must have been serious about wanting Xie Lian to not look like a total invalid, because he actually stood back and waited until Xie Lian was upright and somewhat steady.

It didn't take much height to be overcome with vertigo these days. Xie Lian had disliked heights for a very, very long time by now. Ever since that jump that had broken his leg back during the war. His first fall, both literally and figuratively. When he had truly begun to realise that everything was slipping from his fingers and nothing he did would salvage it. He had always felt a bit more leery about heights from that point, and now all it took was peeking down towards a floor that seemed to fall out from beneath his unsteady feet.

Still, he risked a glance up when they first entered the main hall, Xie Lian trailing helplessly behind the man. It was overwhelming — not quite as bad as the street but still more than his sloshing brain could manage. People, ghosts he realised, of all size and shape filled the hall, cramming around tables and filling the room with shouts and cries. The predominant colour was red, from the columns, to the lamps, to the silky curtains that hid a dais at the far end, but the black dressed croupiers and garishly dressed patrons provided a counter-balance.

That was all he was able to take in before the sheer dizzying size overwhelmed him and he had to stare back down at his shambling feet. It was a relief when the man found a table he wanted to join and Xie Lian could sink to his knees again. Whatever happened next was outside his control and beyond his interest. He may as well enjoy the thin shelter offered by the floor.

On the edge of his hearing, Xie Lian was vaguely aware of the mortal making his case to the table. If he was going to be allowed to join the collection of players then he would need something of reasonable value to gamble — that, of course, being Xie Lian. The things he said felt like spider legs up Xie Lian's spine so he stared at the feet surrounding the table instead. There was one pair of clawed bird-like feet, and another that were like tree trunks with only three toes on each round foot. These were two very obvious ghosts. The less obvious ghost was the one wearing delicate silken slippers, but Xie Lian had no doubt that she too was dead — there was no way the silk could stay so pristine in a place like this otherwise. They would have been worn down and dirtied by now. Another pair of feet were clad in very sharp, black boots that belied subtle taste. This was most likely the croupier, as they seemed to match the boots of others around the room. That meant that there was only one other human at this table, who was given away by plain, dirt encrusted boots. They were expensive leather and well designed, very modern, so this was obvious someone of wealth trying to make a bit more at a ghostly gambling table.

"—very obedient, will do whatever you want." Xie Lian was forced to focus back in on the mortal because a hand had landed possessively on his head. Not hurting, not moving, which

was good or he might lose the thread again. " *Whatever* you want, and however you want it. You can be as rough as you like with it, because it'll just get up again, and again, and again."

"I've seen ghost fires that look more aware than that sad thing," came one voice from far above Xie Lian. "I don't believe for a second it can do a thing. Who cares if you have some comatose little monster at your heels? Fucking humans."

"Don't believe me?" huffed the man. "I'm good to my word, and its valuable! Go, show this esteemed young master what you can do."

A boot prodded Xie Lian, and suddenly he was shuffling forward under the table. He wasn't entirely sure what he was about to do, because he certainly hadn't initiated anything that had been done to him. He had been moved, and used, and that was about it. What the man expected would happen now was beyond Xie Lian, unless he thought his threat had scared Xie Lian into participation. Still, he kept moving forward, because thinking of another course of action was beyond him, each half-thought falling from him like a poorly threaded needle before he could make the first stitch of a plan.

The bird-like legs shifted, spread, inviting, though the low chuckling noise above was less so. Eventually Xie Lian's head was resting between thighs. He could feel scales brush his ears. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation, but a strange one. In front of him was a crude robe, held closed by a belt that looked more like it was made of the twine with which you would wrap a plucked chicken. The smell was of mildewy feathers, and a muskiness that Xie Lian had come to associate with this part of the human anatomy. Apparently ghosts didn't differ that much.

He really didn't know what he was going to do now. Probably nothing. Something would be done to him, eventually, but that was par for the course.

"Enough," a sharp voice said overhead. It was authoritative. "Chengzhu doesn't allow that sort of display within the Gambler's Den. If that's the sort of entertainment you're after, take it to the alleys or the brothels. The silk demon will be allowed as an acceptable wager for low-to-mid-level bidding."

And that was that. Xie Lian's face was briefly touched by a broad hand, clawed and feathered, and a thumb was pressed between his lips, but that was it. It left a bad taste on his tongue, but his whole head felt like one, big, bad, fuzzy taste being surrounded by the chaos of the Gambling Den so it didn't make much of a difference. He managed to find enough control of his limbs to turn and lurch back to the man.

He wasn't allowed to stay on his knees though. The man, self-satisfied at talking his way into the game, grabbed Xie Lian by his robes and tugged until he over-balanced and fell forward. Kneeling, face against the floor as he tried to get his bearings and not throw up again, a pair of boots thumped onto his back. Xie Lian sighed out. So that was the game. Well, it at least meant he wouldn't be moving anymore, and it wasn't like a human's legs were heavy. The weight barely registered, and the humiliation meant less than nothing. How could a pair of feet mean a thing, to someone like Xie Lian?

So he closed his eyes and focused on the coolness of the floor, and simply waited. Things would remain still and stable and easy on his brain for only as long as the man won his games, after all. Eventually he would, perhaps, be leaving with one of the other legs at this table.

Perhaps he would learn what was between the scaled legs of the chicken-ghost.

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Hua Cheng stepped onto his dais in the Gambler's Den but didn't bother announcing his presence to the room at large, yet unsure if he intended to oversee or not. The thought of being surrounded by these vile masses and their petty problems was repugnant, today especially when his entire body was feeling like a single, overwrought nerve. And yet if he had stayed a minute longer in the Manor he would have gone mad. Or driven Yin Yu mad.

His servant had not been able to disguise his obvious relief when Hua Cheng had snarled that he was leaving for the Den. He had been back in Ghost City for less than a week after a long, tedious lead had turned up nothing but a pathetic little grotto of ghosts that he had dispersed with a wave of his hand. He was not in a good mood.

You would think that after the sixth or seventh century he would stop expecting things but there was something pathetic and ignorant and needy at the core of Hua Cheng that he had never quite been able to strip from himself, so he never learnt his lesson. Instead, he returned with his undead heart somehow shredded once more and terrorised his manor staff to make up for it, destroying a suite of rooms so they could be rebuilt from scratch, sending Yin Yu running back and forth on contradictory errands, and generally working out his frustration on everything and nothing.

Until he settled on another worthwhile lead, it wasn't like he had anything more productive to turn his limitless powers towards. Maybe he could burn some temples just to watch the gods scramble like bugs whose rotten log had been peeled open.

Regardless, here he was, standing at the edge of his dais and staring down at the pathetic sea of ghosts and mortals that scuttled around his domain, hoping that if they rutted against the filth of this place thoroughly enough that a scrap of his luck might rub off on them. This, at least, might be a reasonable place to vent some of his frustration. There were always people desperate for Hua Chengzhu's attention when he was in residence; everyone knew that the biggest bets, the biggest risks, the biggest rewards all went through him. Some days it was tedious, but today he wouldn't mind tearing a few limbs off some selfish, grovelling mortal. Maybe there were even gods hidden among the filth today.

He peered down through the gauzy red curtain — from his side it was delicate enough that it only cast the room in a faint, red sheen, while from the other side it didn't so much as reveal a silhouette unless he wanted it to. He assessed what was in his Den today. Plenty of the usual lot, some Ghost City residents that were less here for big risks and rather just to get wrapped up in the energy of the Gambler's Den. There was a table of cave ghouls in one corner that had been passing around the same three eyeballs for almost a decade now. Some ghosts were here for more serious bets: ones that had more resentment than they did power, or who had final requests they wanted fulfilled before moving on, or some that were just determined to

flaunt their meagre abilities at the dice tables. A handful of humans were scattered around, trying to be inconspicuous in their masks while they shied away from the more monstrous patrons. Fear, mixed with either desperation or greed oozed off them in equal measure. No gods. No one outright causing trouble. Dull. Tedious.

And then, for a moment, the world stopped. All sound vanished, everything in the room faded, and a numbness consumed Hua Cheng in a way that made him feel like he had slipped away from his body entirely, like he was suddenly a ghost fire lost on a battlefield again.

There was a man on the floor.

Centuries ago, they had made statues to his god.

Centuries ago, they had destroyed those statues. You couldn't find them anymore, not the originals, all Hua Cheng had were distant mortal memories of them. These days, Hua Cheng made his own, made enough to replace every single desecrated statue from the days of his youth. But there were no more original statues of his god.

Of course, this wasn't entirely true.

He had exactly three. They were nearly eight centuries old, all constructed during the time of Xianle's fall.

Kneeling statues. After his god had all but destroyed himself in his desperation to save his people, the disgusting, ungrateful, unworthy trash had burned his temples, destroyed his statues, and had made these instead. His god, kneeling on the ground, for people to step over, for them to scrape their boots against, onto which they tried to tread their misfortunes.

There was nothing more disgusting.

The first time Hua Cheng had come across a surviving one, he had nearly destroyed it on sight, filled with nothing but helpless rage and grief at the sight of that face pressed to the ground.

Except he hadn't.

Because that was his god. People had forced him to his knees, pressed him to the ground, spent so long scraping filth off onto him that the stone was worn down in places, *but it was his god* . So he had taken the statue. He had cleaned it. He had repaired it to the best of his ability, and improved it where the craftsman's laziness and contempt had failed its subject. He had lifted it from the ground and found a high shelf for it so that even if it was forced to kneel, it could still look down and see the world. See Hua Cheng, below it and as devout as ever.

Over the years, he had found exactly two others. He had taken the same care to retrieve and repair and preserve them. If he couldn't find and help his god, he could at least try to heal his divine statues. Most days Hua Cheng could barely stand to look at them, avoided doing so as much as possible, but he never regretted raising them out of the filth into which they had been cast.

If his god could hold a filthy child who ruined robes that would have been worth more than his life a hundred times over, Hua Cheng could do this.

Which was all say, Hua Cheng knew the shape of his god on his knees. He hated that he did, but he knew it. Knew the curve of his spine, the fall of his hair, the misery of the face so often carved by cruel hands.

There was a man kneeling on the floor of his gambling hall, with another man's feet resting on him, and Hua Cheng was going to kill someone tonight after all. And it was going to be slow. It was going to be by bloody inches.

He didn't even need to announce his presence, because the killing intent in the room had become so thick that there were patrons dropping to the floor and those stumbling back, choking and panicked. Hua Cheng made no effort to rein it in. He couldn't have if he had wanted to. Eight hundred years of fury and failure and vengeance were coming forth now — except now it had a singular focus.

He stepped out from behind his curtains.

No one clamoured for his attention. They cringed back and watched, waiting. The foreigners, those whohad come to Ghost City out of desperation, cowered, searching for some clue as to what was happening, what they should be doing. The locals were a mixed bag. Half watched with barely restrained excitement, the other half were discreetly slipping towards exits. They were the smart ones.

"Well?" he snarled. "Who came to play Crimson Rain Sought Flower? Don't waste my time."

There was trepidation, at first, but eventually bodies began pushing themselves towards the base of his dais, vying for attention and favour. The mortal at the table was one. Hua Cheng had known he would be, he could see the arrogance and greed from across the hall, every wretched vice written large and base across his face. He would have to be, to think he could force Hua Cheng's god to the ground with impunity. Hua Cheng had slaughtered Heavenly Officials for lesser slights.

As this mortal man stood, boots thumping off his god's back, he reached out and knotted his disgusting fist in his god's hair, yanking him forward. No other sound in the world mattered, except the little, surprised choking sound his god made. Hua Cheng would have that noise carved into his marrow until the day his spirit finally dispersed. He might carry it into his next life. The man yanked, and his god struggled to get his feet under himself, failed, clearly off-balance and weak. He fell and was dragged even as he scrambled to keep up.

E-Ming was rattling loudly enough to be heard, its eye rolling with fury; it was only Hua Cheng's fist on its hilt that stopped it from flying out and turning this mortal into a pile of steaming meat already. It was only eight hundred years of ironclad resolution and willpower that stopped Hua Cheng from flying down there and doing it himself with his bare hands.

But that would be satisfying his own selfish desires. He did not, yet, know what his god wanted. He did not know what sort of hand he would want in this mortal's destruction, and Hua Cheng would not deprive him of that satisfaction. He also did not know what sort of

discretion his god may need or desire. And slaughtering a random patron unprovoked in the middle of his Gambler's Den and whisking his god away in his arms would not be discreet. It would be satisfying. It would begin to calm the howling monster in Hua Cheng's lungs that wanted this man's *blood* but he had no way of knowing if that would have consequences for his god.

So he would wait. He had waited nearly eight hundred years. He could wait the length of time it took for the man to step to his dais. The length of time it took to roll a pair of dice. He would have to spend the rest of his death repenting for every extra second he allowed his god to spend on the floor, but he was prepared to do that already anyway.

"You."

Hua Cheng ignored all the other trash that was calling out their bids, eyes trained exclusively on the man that held his god by the hair. That arrogant grin of his was back, like he believed that receiving the city lord's attention was further proof of his good luck. He stepped to the table arranged at the base of the dais and the croupier ghost that manned it.

"What is your bet?" asked the croupier.

The mortal offered a bow. Too shallow for a city lord, never mind a Ghost King. His eyes glittered with excitement and greed. Hua Cheng considered plucking them out and stringing them like a decoration to hang above the door.

"Lord Crimson Rain, I wish all those who spurned my offers of service to be struck dead in their beds."

An insult of a request. If this mortal truly gave a shit, he could do it himself, but instead he begged at the feet of his betters.

"And if you lose?" the croupier continued.

It was clear that the man did not believe he would lose. He was high off the successes he had already won in the gambling hall, drunk on the glitz and excitement of Ghost City and his own fragile fortunes. But he acknowledged the demand by taking a step back and kicking Hua Cheng's god.

His god barely responded. He had already been curled on the ground, head limp and curtained off by tangled hair, and the boot to his ribs only caused his body to shift minutely.

Hua Cheng was going to peel every sliver of flesh off this mortal. He would start with that foot. He would pull strips off, like he was peeling lychee fruit and then grind the bones he found beneath like the seed at its core. He would see how long the mortal could walk on those disgusting feet after that. See what he could kick then.

"This is a demon I captured. It has great and strange powers, but I've trapped and tamed it. I offer it as collateral."

There was a mocking chatter rising around the hall. Anyone that was familiar with the bets that Hua Cheng took knew that this would, under normal circumstances, be a paltry offering. The offering was made even worse by the fact that their lord was in such a clearly bad mood.

"Ha, you think one demon is enough for Hua Chengzhu?"

"Chengzhu could trap any demon he wanted!"

"That looks half-dead, better to sell it as meat than offer it to Chengzhu! You'll be lucky if you aren't turned into meat with it!"

"Silence." Hua Cheng didn't need to shout. You could have heard a pin drop. If he heard one more person say such a thing about his god, he was going to slaughter everyone in the room and be done with it. Then, to the man, he said, "You want me to take many lives, and offer up only one? How is this worth my time?"

That seemed to stump him. Fortunately, Hua Cheng knew what he wanted and how to get it in the most discreet and natural way possible for the Gambler's Den.

"If you lose, you offer his life and your own."

Of course, the mortal could refuse. Some got cold feet, once it was their own life on the line. But this one wouldn't. He thought he was too clever, too lucky, too unstoppable. He had already won games, and this, facing off with the Ghost King himself and walking away victorious? That was a fitting end to his story, as he saw it.

No, he wouldn't refuse.

And he didn't.

"High wins," said Hua Cheng, as he stepped down from the dais.

The anticipatory silence of the Gambler's Den only intensified — games with Hua Cheng were generally run by a croupier, and were more often than not evens-and-odds. It was rare for Hua Cheng himself to descend and roll the dice. The mortal didn't know that though. The mortal stepped up to the table and accepted the cup that the croupier passed him. He rattled it grandly, flourished, and pulled it back to reveal a four and a five.

He gave a relieved sigh, hope clearly still buoying him.

Hua Cheng held out a hand and accepted the dice. He didn't bother with a cup. He was done with this. He tossed them, barely waiting for his double sixes to land.

The hall exploded with exultation for their Chengzhu. The mortal's face had gone ashen, and he was beginning to hastily back away.

"Ah— ah, well played, my lord, thank you for this chance. I leave you with your prize, of course, thank you for—"

He backed right up into one of the croupiers, a towering hulk of muscles with no head but multiple arms. All four of her hands clamped around the man, and the ghost's singular, massive eye on her chest peered up at Hua Cheng, waiting for instruction.

"Take him away, I'll see to him later," said Hua Cheng dismissively.

The man was shaking, body only held upright by the ghost behind him now that his knees had given away. Pathetic. Hua Cheng hadn't even begun to hurt him, and already he fell apart. And he thought he could do anything to his god?

"Please, my lord, I don't, I don't, I—"

"You lost," Hua Cheng hissed, and it was a voice that didn't so much come from his mouth as it did his entire ghostly essence. The temperature in the room was notably dropping with every word. "Your life is forfeit. For me to do with as I please." He looked away, no longer interested in the mortal's blubbering. "Take that filth away. Everyone else, scram."

The word was delivered with the entire crushing weight of his killing intent, and the hall was emptied in an instance. Quite suddenly there was no one left except the empty tables, abandoned dice, and Hua Cheng standing over the crumpled, trembling figure of his god.

Hua Cheng's throat was suddenly dry, his chest entirely empty. He had been hunting for his god for centuries, but never once had he thought of a scenario where they might meet like this — where his god had been beaten and traded like meat, and Hua Cheng was now the one holding the receipt. He didn't know what to say or what to do. Had he scared his god? Or disgusted him? He would have heard every word Hua Cheng had spat, and felt his ghostly aura as thickly as anyone else in the room. Did he think Hua Cheng had won him like some trophy or toy? What did Hua Cheng say or do to set things to right?

To start with, not let his god grovel on the ground. If he never saw his god on his knees again, it would be too soon. He dropped down and bent forward; his god's hands had been bound behind his back which was obviously contributing to his poor balance, so if he could just help —

His god flinched back. It was subtle, but it was like a stake through Hua Cheng's chest. He recoiled, putting distance between them.

"I'm sorry," whispered his god, back still curled, face still against the floor. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Hua Cheng would cut his hands off for making his god think he needed to fear them, if that wouldn't be counterintuitive to offering help. He would see what his god needed.

"Gege, may this one loosen your binds?" he asked, voice as low as his god's.

He wasn't sure where the diminutive came from. He hadn't wanted to say Dianxia, even if every cell of his body was singing it, because he still didn't know if His Highness wanted to be known, least of all by a malevolent ghost that now had him in its clutches.

His god let out a small, strained noise. “Please,” he said, and the word broke with desperation.

“Please,” he repeated, now with tears in his voice. He was *begging*, his god was *begging* him.

Hua Cheng crept closer on his knees, moving as slowly as he possibly could even if he wanted nothing more than to rip and tear the filthy silk that dared cut into his god’s skin. His Highness now had his head raised slightly, back not quite as bent, watching him warily. Hua Cheng didn’t like the look on his face, though he didn’t know what exactly about it was off. It seemed pale and pinched, and there were bruises over it, and that was all obviously *wrong* but it wasn’t what felt so off.

His Highness kept blinking, like he didn’t quite have Hua Cheng in focus. It must take a lot to bruise a martial god, even one that had been banished and sealed… could a strike have concussed him? Or was it fear?

As gently as he could, Hua Cheng came to his god’s side and began to work at the silk. It looked like it must have been knotted on there and left like that for ages. It was dirty and the knots had clearly been wrenched tighter and tighter by consistent struggling. If his god had been mortal, who knew what state the hands or arms would be in.

“This one could cut it off faster,” he offered, not quite daring to pull out a sharp object unannounced when his god looked so on edge already. He would never give his god more reason to fear him.

“No!”

His Highness lurched up, suddenly scrambling to back away, eyes wide. Hua Cheng pulled back once more, hands raised in concession. As his god backed away though, he suddenly clamped his eyes shut and lowered his head down to his chest, breathing and gulping as if feeling ill.

“Gege, I won’t cut it,” said Hua Cheng desperately, trying to inch closer, panic in his dead heart. “I won’t cut it. This one will only untie it. Please.”

His Highness neither welcomed nor refused him. He simply sat awkwardly on the floor, head on his chest and legs sprawled ungainly. He was only wearing a single robe, and didn’t even have trousers or boots on. At the very least he was on longer kneeling, but Hua Cheng wanted to scoop him off this filthy floor and whisk him away to Paradise Manor. He wanted to lay him in the softest bed with the cleanest sheets and cover him with the finest robes. But he also didn’t dare do anything so forward when his god was clearly so vulnerable.

Hua Cheng continued to creep forward, and when he was not rebuked he reached around for the silk. He stayed in front of his Highness this time. It was a little harder to see his work, but with the way His Highness kept his head bowed and shoulders hunched it wasn’t too hard to see around him, and he didn’t want to make him feel so exposed as to have a Ghost King at his back again. Perhaps that was what had scared him so badly, an unknown threat standing behind him, suggesting knives?

Several butterflies peeled from his vambraces and fluttered around the mess of knots and silks and swollen flesh, to help him make sense of how it all came together. It would be slow work.

"If gege is uncomfortable, he may lean against this one," said Hua Cheng. He didn't know if this was the right thing to offer or not. He felt like he was surrounding his god, and as much as the thought appealed to him he could only imagine how it felt to His Highness. Like a cage of dead flesh. Still, it couldn't be comfortable to sit like he was.

"I'll get you filthy," his god said, voice a little vague and tones slightly off.

"Gege's presence could only ever improve these robes."

His god let out a little noise, but without seeing his face Hua Cheng couldn't guess at what he was feeling. He stayed sitting stiffly though, not touching Hua Cheng in any way except where it was necessary for Hua Cheng's fingers to brush his arms while they worked at the silk.

Time passed like that. Hua Cheng worked quietly and diligently. If it wasn't quite so horrifying, it would almost be meditative to perform such a task for his god. As it was he just wanted it to end so that he could take this silk and burn it for the crime of holding his god down. Except as he began to make a bit of progress he suddenly felt it twitch against him.

Hua Cheng's hands stilled, eyes staring sharply down at the silk. It hung limply and innocently, but now he focused. Not on the knots, not on his god, but on the silk band.

The silk band.

The demon silk that followed His Highness. He was an idiot. What else could possibly have a chance of imprisoning his god so completely other than his own spiritual device? He had to grit his teeth to keep back a growl. What a useless demon, to be contained by something as simple as some knots? It could have freed and helped His Highness long ago, and instead it had been the very tool of his imprisonment.

"If you can move, you had better be working on releasing him," he hissed at the silk.

His god's breath caught a little, but the silk demon listened. It was a stupid, useless thing, but it seemed to be trying at least. Twisting and prodding and moving with Hua Cheng's hands, it tried to wiggle itself out of the knots into which it had been tied.

"Please don't hurt it," came his god's thin, desperate voice.

No one in the world deserved the kindness of his god.

"If that is gege's wish, then I won't," he swore.

With the silk demon doing its share of the work, things sped up a little. Finally the last knot was unravelled and the silk band zipped into the air. It spun and twirled, as if trying to work out its kinks, and then immediately darted at His Highness. It was tempting to snatch it from

the air, but Hua Cheng resisted and in a flash the creature had disappeared beneath his god's robes. His Highness let out a sigh that came out as more of a sob.

Then he tried to move his arms, and that really was a sob.

Hua Cheng didn't even think, he just reached around, gently taking the wrists and helping to move them away from where they had been bound at the small of his back. It was clearly painful, even as he fed spiritual energy into them. How long had they been held like that? He ran his hands up and down his god's arms, trying to press life back into the stiff, locking muscles.

His butterflies, which had been helping him survey the knots up until this point, surged around his god's bloodied wrists, their tiny feet clambering to help, to heal, to finally fulfill their truest purpose.

But His Highness didn't stay still for the ministration. At first he moved only his hands and fingers, arm muscles jumping under Hua Cheng's hands as they tried to get used to movement again, but then, too soon, he was lifting his arms. His hands jerked up awkwardly, almost smacking Hua Cheng in the face in their uncoordinated efforts, and Hua Cheng wasn't sure what his god was attempting to do as his hands found the back of his head. They scrambled in tangled hair, trembling and searching for something.

"Gege?" said Hua Cheng, no longer sure what to do with his own hands. His butterflies were fluttering around him in a cloud, distressed at losing their perch on the abraded skin.

"Please," His Highness was murmuring. "Please. *Please*. You don't need it, I'll do— please, I'll do whatever you want."

Hua Cheng might be sick if he had to keep listening to his god beg anything of him like that.

"Whatever you like, gege, whatever you like," he said. "What can this one do?"

"Please take it out." Even though His Highness' head was still bowed, he could hear how thick the tears were. Pure, raw desperation. "Please. I'll do whatever you want without it. I'll stay. I'll be good. Just take it out, *please*."

Hua Cheng didn't understand. He couldn't understand. He didn't want to understand. But he carefully brushed His Highness' hands aside, and used his own fingers to part the hair through which he had been scrambling. And then he found it.

He was going to go and destroy every single person who had so much as glimpsed his god in this position and not done anything to help. He was going to make their deaths as slow as possible. He—

There was a nail.

A large, metal nail, hammered straight down through his god's skull. He could see the dark, bloody glint of its round head, just barely raised above the curve of his scalp.

No wonder he seemed confused. No wonder he seemed disoriented and scared and ill. Someone had pierced a *nail* through his *brain* and his god had been unable to die, only able to endure.

Hua Cheng was going to burn the world down and then himself for letting this happen.

There would be no gentle way to get this out, that much was obvious. Its entrance had almost certainly been traumatic, and its removal would be equally so. Leaving it in though was unthinkable.

"This will hurt," he said. He wasn't sure if it was a warning or an apology or a prayer.

All his god said to that was another broken *please.*

This time Hua Cheng moved closer and pressed his god more firmly against him. There was nothing for it, if he was going to draw out the nail he needed leverage, and he needed His Highness to stay still. His Highness let himself be moved, and that was almost worse than if he had fought Hua Cheng. His head pressed against his shoulder, their chests almost flush, and Hua Cheng's legs bracketed his god's. In another world, this would feel intimate. This would feel like Hua Cheng had finally succeeded in tucking his god away from everything that wanted to hurt him, had succeeded in putting his own worthless body between his god and the world.

Except he was going to be the one causing pain now.

"I'll be quick," he said, more to his god's hair than anything else.

His butterflies had formed a thicker and thicker crowd overhead in anticipation, their silvery light casting the nail in a stark glow. He let his fingers lengthen into black claws, strong and dexterous and slender enough to slip beneath the protruding head of the nail. Even just brushing it like this, he felt his god twitch almost convulsively against him. He made no noise though. Hua Cheng offered a silent prayer before getting a better grip and *pulling.*

The scream was inhuman. The nail was only halfway out but his god thrashed so violently that he was thrown entirely from Hua Cheng's arms. He hit the ground and writhed. It didn't even seem intentional, not a pain response, exactly, but something else. His limbs jerked and thrashed and hit the ground with enough force to crack the tile, and the butterflies were swarming in a chaotic mass, desperate but unable to land.

Hua Cheng leapt forward, trying to gather His Highness up the best he could.

It wasn't easy. Even with his spiritual power sealed, His Highness was strong and his thrashing was unrestrained and terrible. His Highness's head bucked so wildly that when it made contact against Hua Cheng's own face he felt something in his cheek crack. But the nail had to come out, this half-state was worse than either other option, to have it hanging there, with thick, heavy, damp *chunks* glistening on its surface. With all his considerable spiritual power, Hua Cheng reeled his god back against his chest, wrapped his legs and free arm around him and ignored the horrible, throat-shredding cries that were being wrenched from him, and reached around for the nail once more.

It took one more tug, and it jerked free.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, His Highness stopped moving. He slumped like something boneless and dead against Hua Cheng's chest.

He might be dead.

Hua Cheng's heart didn't beat, but it felt like somehow it had stopped all over again.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from the gaping, black hole in the back of his god's head. The insides glittered with the butterflies' silver light, reflecting a perforated brain.

He twisted his entire body as far to the side as he could without disturbing where His Highness lay across his chest and gagged. He was lucky that as a ghost, he rarely ate. Unlike Black Water he had little interest in it except as something occasionally recreational, so his gut was empty and he had nothing to throw up. His dead body tried anyway, as if it could remove the image of his god's exposed brain from his mind if only it retched enough.

During the time he was uselessly gagging, his butterflies had gotten to work. They covered his god's head and shoulders like a great, shimmering hood and cape, leaving not a single spot exposed as they set to their sacred duty. Hua Cheng, trying to recover himself, sat back up and eased his god down into a more comfortable position. He rested His Highness's head on his lap, and reached around to reposition his limbs into something that looked less uncomfortable. More like his god really had just chosen to lay his head on his servant's lap for a nap.

It gave Hua Cheng time to plan. Actually getting his thoughts into enough order to think was a whole separate matter, but he would need to.

The first and most important thing was getting his god somewhere comfortable. He didn't dare move him now, not when his butterflies were actively attempting to repair his brain and skull, but as soon as his god was in one piece again he would take him somewhere, anywhere, better than this wretched floor. Until then, he had a few things to do that couldn't wait.

There was a knock on the door.

Enter, Hua Cheng ordered through the communication array, not wanting to raise his voice.

Yin Yu obeyed. Behind him followed a female ghost in a long-tongued mask, one of his croupiers. The room was thick with the smell of blood and the feeling of Hua Cheng's furious aura; the croupier slunk as close to Yin Yu as possible.

"You ran the table that piece of trash was playing at," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, Chengzhu," she said, clearly afraid of what that would mean for her.

"Tell me exactly what he said. Every word."

Her eyes flickered to the body sprawled on Hua Cheng's lap. Having His Highness exposed in such a way would not be Hua Cheng's first choice, but it was nothing this woman had not seen already. If anything, it was less, since his head was now completely obscured beneath a cloud of butterflies. He wondered what she thought of it. If she and Yin Yu had been outside that door for any length of time, she would have heard the screaming, and it wasn't like his wraith butterflies had a kindly reputation. Did she think he was torturing his new acquisition?

Yin Yu stayed professional and efficient though, which was why Hua Cheng kept him around. His masked head tipped towards the croupier; he said something in her ear that Hua Cheng made no effort to hear.

Finally she took a deep breath and spoke. "He was a new customer — obviously human. Didn't know shit. Was nervous at first, but then he won his first game and he got cocky. Had pretty good luck, won a few games in a row. Wasn't making friends at the table."

"And?"

Her eyes flickered down towards His Highness again, clearly understanding what Hua Cheng was actually curious about.

"This… He…" Yin Yu leaned over and said something in her ear again. Probably coaching her into what to say so that Hua Cheng wouldn't have to immediately disperse her for disrespecting his god. "He had this daozhang with him. His arms were bound behind his back, and he dragged him around. He said that he was a demon he had captured and enslaved and that he would use it— him!— as collateral."

"Did he say anything else about this daozhang?"

She swallowed, looking like she would very much like to disappear. "He said… he implied things about him. That he had possessed him for quite a while, and that he would do whatever he was told. I'm not sure the table was inclined to believe him, the daozhang seemed disoriented. I'm not sure he understood what was being said very well, and he moved strangely. I'm not sure he could follow orders, and some other players didn't think he should be allowed to be collateral. But then he said that the daozhang had strange magic, and couldn't die. He said the ghosts could do whatever they wanted to him, and he would just get better and then they could do it again. He implied he used it— him!— to take out his frustration. And his… he implied that he also used this daozhang to satisfy… other, desires, Chengzhu."

Hua Cheng had to take a deep breath in order to unclench his fist and dampen his killing intent enough so that the croupier didn't look like she was immediately going to collapse under it. Even Yin Yu, who was used to his employer's volatile moods, was looking a little faint under the mask.

"Your information has been useful. There were other ghosts at that table, you said? Ensure that anyone else who may have heard that piece of trash's talk knows that if I ever — *ever* — hear anyone repeat any of those words — if anyone implies a single thing that was said at that table — then I'll make them wish they had passed on when they'd had the chance. Understood?"

“Chengzhu,” the croupier said, bowing deeply at the waist.

“Out,” he said, and she left with all haste.

The gossip was going to be around the city like wildfire, but that was inevitable at this point. Better the ghosts at least knew what type of gossip was acceptable to spread and what wasn’t. He would have to send his butterflies out through the city to listen in, to make sure his word was taken as gospel.

“Chengzhu,” said Yin Yu.

“You heard what she said. Show that trash the same hospitality he thought to show a god. Oh, and take this.”

Yin Yu’s skills as an ex-martial god served him well as his hand snapped up and caught the long, thick nail that was tossed to him. It was damp in his hands with fluids that Yin Yu did not want to look at too closely.

“I want that in him. I don’t care where, so long as he’s not dead before I get to him.”

“Understood. Will there be anything else?”

“Ensure His Highness’s rooms are aired and ready for him. A variety of food should be prepared and a bath needs to be drawn.”

“Understood. …That’s really him then? Xie Lian?”

“Dismissed.”

Yin Yu dipped into a brief bow, and left to perform his duties. And Hua Cheng was left, feeling thoroughly wrung out, to wait for his god to wake again.

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